

Army Corps puts cost of saving species on Missouri River at \$1 billion

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WASHINGTON - Saving sturgeon and endangered birds on the Missouri River won't be cheap. The Army Corps of Engineers puts the price tag at \$1 billion -- and that's just a down payment.

But river advocates and the corps itself argue that Americans shouldn't experience sticker shock, considering an \$8 billion plan for the Florida Everglades and a \$3 billion proposal to restore salmon in the Northwest.

"The point we are trying to make is that re-engineering the river is complex, high-dollar stuff," said Rose Hargrave, a corps official in the Omaha District. "But this is a national treasure."

The \$1 billion is the corps' estimate for buying land from willing sellers, restoring side channels and making creature-friendly improvements on about 20,000 acres along the lower third of the Missouri River.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service insists that improvements on at least 20,000 acres by 2020 is the minimum needed to save the pallid sturgeon, the least tern and the piping plover from extinction. Those improvements would begin to restore the shallow waters and sandbars that wildlife need to flourish.

The Fish and Wildlife Service and the corps have been negotiating on ways to protect the troubled species. The restoration is just one part of a controversial plan recommended by the wildlife agency that hinges on seasonally changing the river's level by releasing water from dams upstream.

The corps made public the \$1 billion estimate at a recent meeting of the Missouri River Basin Association in South Dakota. The estimate will be repeated in briefings about

the river that the corps is giving the new administration in Washington, Hargrave said.

The \$1 billion figure already has generated debate about what it would take to restore one of America's famous rivers after it has been altered radically to support barge traffic and to protect people from floods.

The price of ecosystem restoration everywhere has become eye-catching. The Corps of Engineers spent about \$2 million recently in Missouri to reconstruct a side channel between Columbia and Boonville to reconnect the Missouri River with its flood plain.

In California, governments are putting together an \$8 billion plan to begin restoring marshes and land around San Francisco Bay.

Last week, President George W. Bush traveled to Florida to trumpet his plan to spend \$219 million next year as part of a \$7.8 billion project to restore swaths of the Everglades that were drained long ago.

The \$1 billion for saving species on the Missouri River is on top of the estimated hundreds of millions it would take to restore acreage already targeted. In 1999, Congress gave the corps authority to begin improving more than 100,000 acres along the river and asked how much it would cost.

The corps put that cost, which involves less extensive restoration, at \$750 million. Corps officials were scheduled to present those calculations in meetings this week at the White House Office of Management and Budget.

Chad Smith, a spokesman for the advocacy group American Rivers, said he thinks people ought to begin thinking seriously about the country's long-term commitment considering that the 2004 bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition is drawing near.

"The Missouri River is something for Americans to be every bit as proud of as the Everglades and the Columbia River" salmon recovery, he said.

Mike Olson, the Missouri River coordinator at the Fish and Wildlife Service, said he believes that the overall restoration costs on the Missouri ultimately will rival those of the Everglades.

But Olson said it may not be necessary to spend the \$1 billion for saving species that are the subject of the corps estimate. "We're going to know in the first five to 10 years in this program whether we're making a difference, whether we're on target," he said.

The discussions about river spending are occurring in a highly charged atmosphere. Missouri officials pointedly question the validity of the Fish and Wildlife Service proposals and worry that the flow changes for the sake of wildlife will let states upstream divert water.

"I would find it difficult to believe that the Fish and Wildlife Service can say with any accuracy what is or what is not needed to restore the river," said Ron Kucera, an official with the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

Kucera said he worried that the size of the \$1 billion estimate "is going to scare people away from starting down the road toward doing the things that need to be done."

Chris Brescia, president of MARC 2000, a barge industry trade association in St. Louis, said of the \$1 billion estimate, "We should be asking ourselves if this is the most efficient way of replacing habitat."

Referring to threats to his industry from pro-conservation proposals, Brescia added, "I don't see people getting on board spending proposals like this until the questions of survivability are resolved."

The corps has further delayed decisions on the Fish and Wildlife Service recommendations that could begin to answer some of those questions.

Corps spokesman Paul Johnston said last week that the release of its plan to make flow changes, which had been scheduled on several occasions, now has no firm date. The corps could open itself to lawsuits for violating the Endangered Species Act if decisions aren't made by late

summer.

"We're in a bit of a holding pattern so that we can bring all the new folks in the corps and the Army up to speed," Johnston said.